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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 002777

SIPDIS

STATE FOR P/YU, IO/UNP/MCPHEE, IO/PPC/BATLLE, AND WHA/CEN,
SOUTHCOS ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/15/2009

TAGS: [PREL](#), [PGOV](#), [PM](#), [UNGA](#), [POL](#), [CHIEF](#)

SUBJECT: PANAMA PROBABLY WILL NOT MOVE TO OPPOSE
ANTI-ISRAEL BIAS AT UNGA

REF: A. STATE 240249

[B](#). PANAMA 2452

Classified By: AMBASSADOR LINDA E. WATT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

Summary: Change Is Not At Hand

[1](#)1. (C) This Embassy and other observers hoped that Panama's UNGA voting patterns soon might become more congenial to U.S. interests, given the recent election of Martin Torrijos, a young, modernizing president; his avowed intent to make Panama's UN General Assembly voting "more predictable"; and the GOP's friendly relations with Israel and the local Jewish community. In fact, the Ambassador and other Emboffs have pressed GOP officials to improve Panama's UN voting record, especially with regard to the Israel-Palestine issue. Despite Embassy efforts, as well as lobbying by the local Jewish community, we believe that in the short run Panama likely will continue its past voting pattern on Israel-Palestine questions. On the positive side, Panamanian officials do not seem comfortable voting for empty pro-Palestinian resolutions. Senior GOP officials have defended their stance by citing putative fears of terrorist attacks against the Canal. Embassy will continue to press GOP officials to pursue a more constructive policy vis-a-vis Israel and Palestine at the United Nations. End Summary.

Demarche Delivered

[1](#)2. (C) Delivering Ref A demarche to MFA Foreign Relations Director Dario Chiru at a November 12 meeting, POL Counselor pushed Chiru to consider instructing Panama's UN delegation to vote "no" or at least to abstain on the three Ref A resolutions, arguing that institutionalized bias in the UN General Assembly embodied in the resolutions poisoned the atmosphere against Israel at the UNGA and made the international body all but irrelevant to solving Israel-Palestine issues. He also pointed out that the search for new Palestinian leadership and directions following the death of Yasir Arafat presented important opportunities to peacemakers on both sides. Now was a good time to drop empty rhetoric and oppose tendentiousness at the international body.

"A Matter of Conscience"

[1](#)3. (C) After listening attentively, Chiru promised to discuss the demarche with Minister of Foreign Affairs Samuel Lewis. Sounding very much like his predecessor at MFA under the previous government of Mireya Moscoso, Chiru said Panama's annual votes to support pro-Palestinian resolutions are a matter of conscience for Panama, due to a perceived need to maintain "equilibrium" on the Palestinian question. This is not simply a matter of voting to please an ally (the U.S.) or a friend (Israel), Chiru explained, but to fulfill a "sense of justice when we look at the map." (Read: The lack of a Palestinian state.) If Israel does not feel pressure from the General Assembly, it may simply procrastinate on Palestinian rights, Chiru said.

Present At The Creation

[1](#)4. (C) Chiru pointed out that Panama was one of the founder members of the United Nations, was an active participant in the 1945 conference that wrote the UN Charter, and voted to create the state of Israel in 1947. Following Israeli independence, Chiru said, Panama has felt a "debt" to the Palestinians and worried that Palestinian initiatives were not being pushed with the same force.

A "Debt" Owed To Palestine

15. (C) Chiru was quick to acknowledge UNGA's institutionalized anti-Israel bias; that the yearly Palestinian resolutions would have no practical effect on the issues at hand; and that uncritical international support for Palestine when many Palestinian terrorist groups were resorting to terrorist violence destabilized the UN's need for moderation. On the other hand, while weighing friendly feelings toward Israel against condemnatory votes, Panama acts in a way it believes will best motivate peaceful and comprehensive negotiations on the Palestinian question, Chiru said. The UNGA's pro-Palestinian position reflects Palestinian weakness and the "debt" that many countries, including Panama, feel they owe Palestine, he said.

Comment: Practical Concerns Undercut Principled Approach

16. (C) Aside from its stated sympathy for the Palestinian "underdog," the GOP also plausibly has its eye on Canal security. In a recent discussion with POL Counselor, B'nai B'rith President Joseph Harari related a meeting he had held with President Torrijos and Foreign Minister Lewis prior to the September 1 inauguration. Torrijos turned down Harari's suggestion that Panama adopt a more pro-Israel stance at the UN, saying that doing so could make the Panama Canal a higher-profile target for terrorist attacks, a risk Torrijos said he was unwilling to contemplate. (Ref B.)

17. (C) Former (and future) presidential hopeful Ricardo Alberto Arias, Panama's current UN Ambassador, is another possible complication. A Panamanian foreign minister under President Ernesto Perez Balladares, Arias was partly responsible for U.S.-Panama talks bogging down during the late 1990s on the proposed Multilateral Counter-narcotics Center in Panama. While we do not know the extent of his freedom of action on the Israel-Palestine votes, Arias will doubtless pay strict attention to their possible political implications for himself personally.

WATT